

COLUMNISTS

Is religion relationships or rules?

Whenever there are church-related controversies reported in the press or on television, a number of letters, with predictable content, appear soon thereafter in the letters-to-the-editor columns of secular magazines and newspapers and in diocesan weeklies.

Readers are carefully reminded, as if by an old-fashioned schoolteacher remonstrating with an unusually dense student, that Jesus did not found the church as a democracy, that he deliberately created its hierarchical structure in all its present detail, and that, implicitly at least, he preferred one virtue over every other, including even love: namely, obedience.

The letters may vary in language and examples, but they are all really variations on a single theme: Religion, and the Catholic religion in particular, is a matter of rule-keeping.

These rules are contained in the Ten Commandments, the precepts of the church, some of the sayings of Jesus and the apostles, some dicta scattered here and there in the Old Testament (for example, the Leviticus text on the evils of homosexuality), and in the official teachings of the pope and the hierarchy generally.

In the Catholic scheme of things, according to these letter-writers, all rules have their ultimate origin in God: either directly, by divine utterance as on Mount Sinai or in the words of Jesus, the Son of God; or indirectly, through the



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

voices of God's representatives, namely the pope (for some, it is only the pope) and the bishops.

The fact that there is another version of religion in sacred Scripture doesn't ever seem to cross these letter-writers' minds.

In the Old Testament, there is a whole prophetic tradition in which the virtues of love, justice, mercy, compassion for the poor, and forgiveness (all pertaining to relationships) are at the heart of faith, while the vices of greed, self-righteousness, vindictiveness, and hypocrisy are the antitheses of faith.

The Covenant is portrayed as a sacred love-relationship between God and humanity. God is merciful and forgiving (Leviticus 26:42). Divine mercy is never-ending and we shall always be God's beloved people (e.g., Jeremiah 7:23).

The religion of relationships rather than of rule-keeping is even more clear-

ly pronounced in the New Testament, especially in the words and actions of Jesus himself.

He told the parable of the good Samaritan to remind us that those we are inclined to despise or to judge harshly are often the very ones who shame us in their mercy and kindness toward others.

He told the parable of the prodigal son to remind us that relationships are more important than rules. The prodigal son took off with his inheritance, wasted it, and returned years later asking for nothing more than to be taken in as one of his father's hired hands.

But his father would have none of that. He embraced his son, dressed him in fine clothes, killed one of his prize fatted calves, and held a spectacular feast to celebrate his son's return.

The prodigal son's elder brother, however, had a completely different reaction. He had been "faithful" to his father all those years, had stuck to his domestic chores, hadn't squandered his money on wine, women, and song, had obeyed all the rules, in other words. In fact, those were his exact words of protest against his father's limitless generosity, "I have never disobeyed your command" (Luke 15:29).

Nowhere is the contrast between religion-as-rule-keeping and religion-as-relationship more clearly evident than in this classic story of the prodigal son.

The forgiving father sees true religion

as a matter of relationships. He rejoices over his younger son's change of heart toward his father, and over his return to his family. Relationships had been transformed. Alongside this, rule-violations pale into insignificance.

The elder son, on the other hand, sees true religion as rule-keeping. His brother's conversion is less important than his need to be punished. His brother's return home and the reestablishment of family relationships are less important than the integrity of the moral system.

A rule-based approach to religion places highest priority on the virtue of obedience and loyalty to those in authority. But Jesus seemed to take delight in prodding the religious leaders of his day, calling attention to their pomposity, self-righteousness, hard-heartedness, and hypocrisy, as they laid burdens on others that they themselves would not carry.

He said the despised publicans and prostitutes would enter heaven before they would (Matthew 21:31-32).

Jesus summed up the whole of the Law in the commandment to love God and neighbor (Mark 12:28-34). "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35); even love for one's enemies (Luke 6:27-28).

Two versions of religion: rules and relationships. Which is closer to Jesus?

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Trinity signifies God's love, mystery

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 3:16-18. (R1) Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9. (R2) 2 Corinthians 13:11-13.

Sunday is Trinity Sunday.

The first thing the doctrine of the Trinity says to us is that there are some issues in life too big to understand, too big for us to get into our tiny skulls.

In 1292, the Sorbonne Library in Paris housed 1,338 handwritten books, representing nearly all the knowledge of a few thousand years. Today, worldwide, that is about as many books as are published every day. Information is exploding all around us. Just to keep up is a challenge.

It's a complex world, and we are constantly reminded of how much we do not know. So, the fact that the Trinity is a mystery should come as no surprise. No matter what we say about God, we can always say more. Just as we cannot drink a well dry, we cannot exhaust all there is to know about God.

However, thanks to Jesus, we can know a great deal about God. Plato once asked the Jews if your God is one God, whom did he know? Whom did he love? The Jews could give no answer. Hence their monotheism won very few pagans.

Pagans reasoned that a one God is an alone God, an alone God is a lonely God, a lonely God is an unhappy God. Who wants him? So the pagans kept



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

their pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Jesus answered Plato's question by revealing that God is not just one God, but three persons in one God. A human person is an individual who has a human nature; a divine Person is someone distinct who possesses a divine nature.

God has a mind. He knows from all eternity. He knew himself and that knowledge generates a thought of himself. Because he is perfect, that thought has to have all the reality of what it is the thought, namely of God. But the thought is distinct from the thinker. So a distinct divine reality is a person. We express our thoughts by words, so St. John says, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God!" Sometimes Scripture calls the thinker "Father" and the thought "Son."

But God has a will, as well as a mind;

he has a love as well as a thought. Whom did God love from all eternity? The Father loved his Son; the Son loved his Father. But love is something between two, something distinct from both the lover and the beloved. Also love gives totally of itself. So into this divine love, Father and Son give their whole being, the divine nature. Thus we have another distinct divine reality, a third Person.

We express love, not by words, but by sighs. Shakespeare characterized the lover as sighing like furnace. The Latin word for a "sigh" is "spiritus"; and because God's love is not carnal, "Holy Spirit."

Because the Father is life, the Son truth, and the Holy Spirit love, God is perfectly happy. Life, truth and love are the least common denominator of happiness. We seek them in a person, so we marry. But no person can give us all the life we want, all the truth we crave, nor all the love we need, so no person can make us perfectly happy. Only God can. And that is all heaven is — a wedding to three Persons who can give us all the life, the love and the truth our hearts desire.

So, even here and now, no matter what our need is, God can supply it. That is the real glory of the Trinity. God's chosen people needed more than a distant God, so the Father sent his Son. When Jesus' time ended, he did

not want us to walk alone, so he sent his spirit to guide and guard us.

A man had a collection of exotic fish. He spent much time cleaning the tank, feeding the fish, checking for any illnesses or infections. His attention prevented the fish from dying off quickly. Yet the fish were afraid of him. Every time he peered into the tank, they'd hide. Even when he dropped in food.

Often that is the way we treat God. But the Trinity says he created us just to share his life and love and truth with us, to watch over us and care for us.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, June 3

2 Peter 1:2-7; Mark 12:1-12

Tuesday, June 4

2 Peter 3:12-15, 17-18; Mark 12:13-17

Wednesday, June 5

2 Timothy 1:1-3, 6-12; Mark 12:18-27

Thursday, June 6

2 Timothy 2:8-15; Mark 12:28-34

Friday, June 7

2 Timothy 3:10-17; Mark 12:35-37

Saturday, June 8

2 Timothy 4:1-8; Mark 12:38-44

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